

Kayin and Hevel – Cain and Abel – Acquisitiveness and Impermanence

A Teaching Shared in 2010 with Chochmat Ha Lev for the reading of Parashat B'reishit and during Sukkot

Once again we begin the cycle of studying our holy Torah, plumbing her text for meaning and insight. Genesis' weekly readings are fast paced. This week the narrative encompasses not only the creation of the world but the archetypal stories of the first family – Adam, Eve and their children.

Last week, as we gathered in the sukkah, Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man brought us a very deep teaching (from a contemporary Jerusalem text called *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*) about the names Cain and Abel – in Hebrew, *Kayin* and *Hevel*.

The root of the *Kayin* is related to acquisition, possessions – our very way of being in the material world: *kinyan* is the process of ownership. *Hevel*, on the other hand, is a word connoting insubstantiality; it means vapor, breath, emptiness, worthlessness and hints at the impermanence of acquiring anything.

The biblical book *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), read in its entirety during Sukkot, uses the word *hevel* repeatedly to describe the difficulty the author has in making sense of human existence.

The story of Cain and Abel, then, is not just a story about sibling rivalry that highlights the unintended outcome of jealous, angry, and violent action. The brothers' names bring us the opportunity to meditate on how a name can affect one's way of being in the world: perhaps we are asked to contrast attachment with non-attachment? How does attributing these meanings to their names affect understanding of the story?

I invite us to consider this extra layer of meaning to a very old story and ponder how this is relevant to our lives.

With blessing for wisdom of heart as we learn and study,
Rabbi SaraLeya
24 Tishre 5770